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Are English language teachers in Saudi Arabia ready to integrate technology?

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Abstract

Saudi government is striving to integrate technology at all school levels. In many schools English language is being taught through modern digital technology. Intel program has been launched to integrate technology in teaching and learning in Saudi Arabia. Qualitative research study was used to investigate English language teachers' readiness to integrate technology in Sabt Al-Alaia, Aseer region in Saudi Arabia. 12 in-service English language teachers participated in this study. Data were collected through structured and semi structured interviews. We found five main themes, (a) Understanding of technology, (b) Use of technology for learning and motivation, (c) Types of technology, (d) Teachers' main concerns, and (e) Teachers' unawareness of Intel program. Participants complained about lack of funding, scarcity of technology in schools and paucity of proper training to use technology. Sabt Al-Alaia regional schools do not have access to technology as their counter parts in other regions of Saudi Arabia. However, all the participants were willing to use technology to teach English as a foreign language. The paper includes implications of evaluation findings, recommendations for policy and directions for further research.

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Introduction

Education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) commenced in 1932. There are three different school levels e.g. elementary school level (grade1 to grade 6), intermediate school level (grade 7 to grade 9) and secondary school level (grade 10 to grade 12). The education is compulsory for all males and females at the age of seven. Nowadays, according to the educational statistics, there are 330,500 schools around the Kingdom for

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both genders. Based on the culture and religion of Saudi Arabia, the educational system follows gender-based schools (Al-Hariri, 1987). However, there are two kinds of school systems, the private school system and the public school system. In the private schools students have to pay tuition fee while in the public schools education is free.

Since 2007, education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has made significant achievements focused on providing educational opportunities for all individuals, despite the geographical scale of the Kingdom and the increasing population. Today, education in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia is entering into a new phase, which focuses on quality of education, ensuring that students in the Kingdom's public education system are being prepared to deal with future challenges such as cultural diversity, economic changes, and globalization. They will be able to accomplish this by acquiring twenty-first century skills while maintaining the values and principles of Saudi society.

In keeping with the wish of King Abdullah bin Abdul Aziz to achieve development in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, a project to develop public education has been launched to act as a major support to the efforts of the Ministry of Education. This will carry out King Abdullah's vision that education is the foundation for building a knowledge-based economy and contribute to Saudi Arabia's move into the ranks of developed countries. It will also facilitate future participation for young people in building a progressive society across all fields (Ministry of Education).

English language is considered one of the most important foreign languages in Saudi Arabia. Students start learning English in public schools at grade 6. Some private schools, very few, have English curriculum from grade 1 and onward. The Ministry of Education is taking special measures to integrate technology in teaching and learning. This vision has developed since 2007 up to now to include Intel (to teach to learn) for future program, which focuses on the integration of all sorts of technologies in teaching and learning. Modern technology is being provided at all levels from elementary school to university level.

Sabt Al-Alaia is a governorate in the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, which is located in the south of the Kingdom. Geographically, it is considered a part of Aseer region. The population of Sabt Al-Alaia governorate is approximately 300,000. There is an office for Education related to the directorate of Education in Bisha governorate, which is a leader governorate in that area, to direct the educational system in Sabt Al-Alaia. There are total 190 schools included 100 elementary school, 59 intermediate schools, and 31 secondary schools for males and females. In addition, there are 12 schools for disabled and 2 evening schools for those who can not attend schools in the day. There are 2181 teachers and 140, 00 students in the region. In our research we have focused on male teachers to avoid being in some ethical issues related to Saudi culture and religion (Al-Hariri, 1987).

Intel Program

The Intel Program is a worldwide project presented by the Intel Corporation with support from Microsoft Corporation. The main purpose for Intel Program is to integrate technology into education. Therefore, students and teachers will involve into the process of teaching and learning. Also, they will gain a high benefit from Intel Program to improve their skills either in teaching for the teachers or learning for the students. Moreover, students use available technology to present their ideas and research to their class. As far As the researcher mentioned that Intel Program is to integrate technology into education; therefore, the researcher should high light on the contents of this program. It includes eight units: the first one is teaching through projects, which focuses on Projects-based learning and the design of the unit. The second unite is planning unit; the main purpose of this unit is Curriculum-Framing Questions and ongoing evaluation process that is based on the student. The third one is to create methods for communication; this unit focuses on the Internet to support teaching and learning. The fourth unite is creating educational models, the focal point of this unit is to shed light on the results of the project from the perspective of the student. The unit number five is an assessment of student projects; this unit concentrates on the comprehensive and formative assessment. The sixth unit is planning for student success, which, focuses on supporting student self-direction. Unit number seven is to support technology; the key point of this unit is to

focus on the role of the teacher in supporting the educational process. Finally, showing portfolios unity this unit focuses on participation in learning. To build these units; all teachers and students should work together to build them (Saudi Intel Web).

The objective of Intel Program Project in Saudi Arabia is to update various aspects of the educational process and its components to global standards, develop an integrated system to evaluate education and measure educational quality, and develop the various elements of the educational process. To achieve these goals the project will include comprehensive curriculum development using technology for foreign language teaching at secondary school level designed to respond to scientific developments and modern technology, meet the knowledge, professional, psychological, physical, mental, and living needs of students. It will also facilitate the professional development of teachers, preparing them to perform their educational duties so as to achieve the developed curriculum objectives, while preparing the educational environment to integrate technology, including Internet technologies and digital models into the curriculum. These factors combine to make the classroom environment more effective in achieving the objectives of learning (Minister of Education).

Teachers are an integral part of any educational systems (Bill, 1997). It is significant to know their concerns and issues through their perspectives. This research study is unique in its nature. Most of the research studies have been conducted in Saudi Arabia about main cities such as Riyadh, Jeddah, Makkah and Madina. Little is known about teachers' perceptions in small regions. The purpose of this study is to seek English teachers' beliefs about using technology for language teaching. The results of this study will be helpful for policy makers, English teachers in small areas and for the Ministry of Education, KSA. The study will investigate what are English teachers' concerns about using technology and how do they perceive technology.

Literature Review

Computer technology has changed every sphere of life (Hill & Hannafin, 2001). It is useful not only for learners but also for teachers (Saglam & Sert, 2012). Recently, the use of technology for teaching is an integral part of successful teaching (Almekhlafi & Almeqdadi, 2010). New technologies are influencing students' learning skills especially reading and writing (Barrel, 1999). Teachers' perceptions about integration of technology in teaching have not got enough attention of researchers (Bruce, 1997). Teachers' beliefs about using technology affect their attitude to use technology for teaching and learning (Almekhlafi, 1999). In Saudi Arabia English language teachers play very important role in teaching and learning (Khan, 2011). In his quantitative and qualitative research study with Syrian high school English teachers Albirini (2006) found that teachers were worried about the devastating effect of technology in the form of internet and western cultural influence on Syrian culture. So, all the participants felt the need of locally created soft wares and computer programs to teach English as a foreign language.

Many educational leaders and policy makers claim that computers and related internet technologies represent important educational innovations (Howley & Wood, 2011). Recent studies have shown that the successful implementation of educational technologies depends largely on the attitudes of educators, who eventually determine how they are used in the classroom (Albirini, 2006).

Teaching and learning a foreign language through technology has become a new trend in foreign language education all over the world (Liu, 2009). Most foreign language teachers know very little about the effective use of technology in education. (Olphen, 2007). In their study of the attitudes of teachers in three middle schools, Atkins and Vasu (2000) found that teachers' concerns have a significant influence on the use of computers in the classroom. A recent study conducted by (Gilakjani, 2012) to identify the factors affecting teachers' use of technology concluded that teachers should be introduced to the types of computer technology and to aim at the usefulness and benefits of these resources in improving teaching and learning. In a related study, Buabeng-Andoh (2012) examined some of the factors that affect the adoption and integration of Information Communication and Technologies (ICT) into teaching, the author concluded that teachers' feelings, knowledge and attitudes among other factors influence their use technology within their classrooms.

Ewa (2005) found that teachers' beliefs were based on dilemmas' and concerns. However, the teachers were willing to use technology in order to benefit from it and to help their students. In a recent study, Saglam and Sert (2012) found that despite the lack of proper training English language teachers were willing to use technology for teaching. Some of them used some sort of technology to improve students' linguistic skills. Odabasi (2000) found that teachers were familiar with technology. The participants described technology helpful to increase students' motivation and to improve students' learning. In their quantitative study with 100 Arab teachers, Almekhlafi and Almeqdadi (2010) found that teachers were integrating technology in their class activities. They used a variety of technology to promote learning among students. The only difference was the method of using technology among male and female teachers.

Research Design

Creswell (2009) defined qualitative research as "a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals and groups ascribe to social or human problems." Researchers using qualitative research often study issues in their natural settings, intending to interpret phenomena in terms of the meaning that respondents give to researchers (Kvale, 2009). Some scholars, such as Phillips and Burbules (2000), mention that researchers cannot claim absolute truths when studying the behaviours and actions of humans. Therefore, qualitative research is an approach that seeks to explore hidden issues and give meaning to them, chiefly by asking questions about phenomena and gaining a better understanding about them through the responses given (Maxwell, 1996). For this research study we relied on qualitative research approach for in depth understanding of English teachers' interests and concerns. This research study conducted in a bounded system. Sabt Al-Alaia region was chosen to carry out this research study. Therefore, we depended on case study design for the purpose of our enquiry.

Participants

The researchers have chosen fifteen male Saudi English language teachers purposefully because we cannot involve female teachers in the study for cultural and religion customs and traditions. Therefore, male researchers cannot interview women in KSA because it is against their culture and their beliefs. Fifteen male Saudi English language teachers were contacted from Sabt Al-Alaia region for this research study. Three of them refused to participate in the research study due to their personal reasons. Twelve in-service teachers participated in this research. All of them have teaching qualification from recognised Saudi universities. They teach at intermediate and secondary schools.

Data Collection and Analysis

Canadian Institutes of Health research (2010) stated that there are some ethical issues associated with educational research and obviously state the principles of ethics that should be followed by researchers including: Minimizing the risk of harm, getting informed consent, maximizing and protecting anonymity and confidentiality, and providing the right to withdraw. Kavale (2009) explained that ethics and interview had a strong relationship. Hence, researchers need to focus on ethical issues while interviewing participants and ethical issues should be undertaken from the start to the conclusion. Therefore, one of the researchers contacted all the participants and took informed consent. The researcher also told the participants in details about his own role as a researcher and about the purpose of the research. The participants were informed that they could stop participating in the study at any time. Two of the participants refused to participate in the beginning. Remaining thirteen participants were willing and were very enthusiastic to express their views. They were well aware of digital technology. They were also informed that their names would not be used in the research study.

We use semi structured and structured interviews for data collection. Face to face interviews were conducted between Jun, July and August 2012. All the interviews were recorded and saved. Two teachers

requested the questionnaire in advance. We send the questionnaire and they replied through e-mails. Their responses were also saved and printed on a paper. We coded the data and then wrote themes. To improve the accuracy we used the member check technique (Krefting, 1991). After identifying the themes we e-mailed the reports to the participants and they affirmed them within a week.

Findings and Discussion

Understanding of Technology

One of our main interests in this study was to know the participants' understanding of technology. It was clear from their responses that all the participants were acquainted with modern technology. Whenever they talked about technology they meant digital technology. One of the participants said,

"Technology means computer, projector, CDs and projectors".

Similarly another said,

"T.V, VCR, data show and laptops are all types of technology".

Use of Technology for Learning and Motivation

We were keen to know about their use of technology in the classroom. All were agreed that technology was helpful. This point of view was based on their previous experience at university level. All the teachers told that they used some sorts of technology in classroom. Most of them mentioned that they used technology to improve students' listening and reading skills. Seven of the participants mention that they motivated students through technology. Some of their samples are as follow;

"I like technology. It is really very helpful. First time I experienced it when I was at university. I use technology in my class as well"

"I use CDs to improve students' listening and reading skills and it works"

"When I use technology student enjoy it. It is very helpful to motivate students".

On the other hand participants also complained about lack of motivation from government side to integrate technology in classrooms.

Type of Technology

Another important theme was the type of technology, which was being used in Sabt Al-Alaia schools. During our semi-structured interviews eleven of the participants mentioned that they used Fawaz Al-Harbi CDs for listening and reading. Fawaz Al-Harbi CD is a CD project that designed by a person his name is Fawaz Al-Harbi. His CD included the ministry English curriculum. Fawaz Al-Harbi Just added sound and videos and some pictures to the curriculum. Also, he got assistance from native speakers to record the reading passages and the speaking parts by their voices. Therefore, many teachers prefers to use it in their classes because it assisted them in teaching the receptive skills (Listening and Reading) so teachers do not do much efforts in their classes, while in the productive skills (Writing and Speaking) it does not take place in Al-Harbi CDs.

They also told that they bring their own CDs and videos to use in the classroom. All the teachers expressed that they also used data show.

One of the participants said,

"I use Al-Harbi' CDs, you know Fawaz Al-Harbi. His CDs are good for listening and reading".

The other participant said,

“We have nothing to use in terms of technology except data show. So we use it occasionally”.

Main Concerns

When we talked about their main concerns three sub themes appeared. First of all, all of the teachers were concerned about paucity of technology. They described that they did not have computers, language teaching soft wares, and internet connections for classroom.

One sample is as follow;

“I know what technology is. But the main problem is that we do not have technology in our school. I bring CDs to school. I myself buy it. We do not have funds to buy”

Secondly, they lamented for the lack of funding. They made clear that whatever they brought to school to teach they brought it from their own pocket. The third sub theme was lack of training. All the teachers emphasized on the need of training to use modern technology in the classroom. One of the participants said,

“We need computers, internet connections and proper training to use technology for language teaching”.

Unawareness of Intel (to teach to learn) program

We were also eager to know teachers’ awareness of Intel program. All the participants were asked about Intel program, its vision, and its implementation. It was serious identified by the participants. They expressed their bewilderment of Intel program. Only one teacher knew the program because he was transferred from another region where Intel program has already been commenced. One of the samples is as follow;

“I know nothing about Intel program. I use only CDs bought by myself. Our government has not provided us anything related to technology”

It is a positive thing that the teachers in Sabt Al-Alaia region have adequate knowledge of modern technology. They not only know digital technology but also use it. It is also note worthy that they are optimistic to use it in the future as well which supports Ewa (2005)’s point of view that teachers were willing to use technology in the future. Most of the teachers find it useful for students which validates Saglam and Sert (2012)’s statement that technology is beneficial for both. One critical issue appeared in this study which shows that Saudi English language curriculum in schools does not equally emphasize on all four skills. Eventually, teachers have to use privately made CDs which mainly focus on receptive skills (listening and reading). This also affirms Albirini (2006)’s finding that locally created soft wares can be useful. A very important issue appeared that Saudi English language curriculum does not much attention on productive skills (writing and speaking).

The teachers in this region have serious concerns. The scarcity of technology is a main issue which shows that Sabt Al-Alaia regional schools do not have same technology as other regions such as Riyadh, Makkah, Jeddah, Madina and Dammam posses. This point of view made clear when we asked about Intel (to teach to learn) program and all the participants nodded in negative except one. One teacher knew this program because he worked in Dammam region before coming to Sabt Al-Alaia region. Intel (to teach to learn) is a latest program of King Abdullah’s government. The main purpose of this program is to integrate technology at school level in all schools of Saudi Arabia. It is clear that Sabt Al-Alaia regional schools need technology and funding. It is also visible that Intel program has not been introduced in Sabt Al-Alaia region. Finally, teachers need proper training to use technology. In his article, Khan (2011) recommends pre-service and in-service teacher training for English language teachers in Saudi Arabia. From above discussions it is crystal clear that English language teachers in Sabt Al-Alaia region are willing to integrate technology into their classes but they need technology and proper training to use it.

Further Research and Recommendations

Our study cannot be generalised to other regions or cities of Saudi Arabia. It is limited to Sabt Al-Alaia region. We also do not know about female English teachers' concerns and perceptions. In future studies, the effectiveness of technology for language learning would be helpful. The effectiveness of Intel (to teach to learn) program has not been explored yet.

Our first recommendation is to provide modern technology in all schools in Sabt Al-Alaia region. Our second recommendation is to provide proper training to in-service teachers to use technology for language teaching. Saudi Universities should offer a course at bachelor of education level to use technology for teaching. Our third recommendation is to redesign English language curriculum at school level. In which all the four skills should have equal importance. Special attention should be paid to active skills as well. Proper soft wares and computer programs should be prepared to teach these skills.

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